

SPORTS

QB competition? Vikings not naming starter now

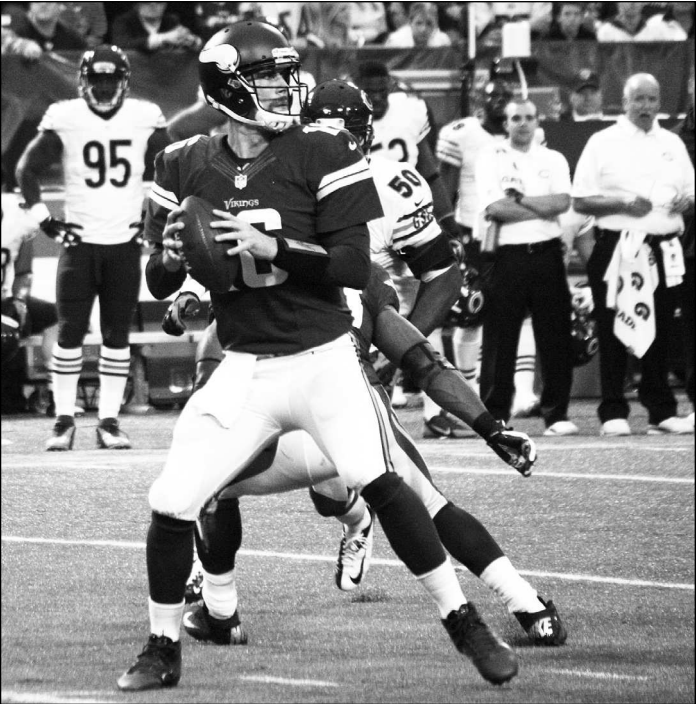
EDEN PRAIRIE (AP) — The Minnesota Vikings brought back veteran Matt Cassel back to be the bridge to the quarterback they were bound to draft this year, and they mapped out the future by trading into the end of the first round to pick Teddy Bridgewater.

Retaining Cassel on a two-year contract has allowed the Vikings the opportunity to be patient with their latest project, but coach Mike Zimmer made clear this week, publicly at least, that the starter won't be determined until training camp.

Bridgewater has said he'd be fine being the backup as a rookie. If he took the job right from the beginning of his career, though, that wouldn't be such a surprise.

"I want to give everybody an opportunity and make sure it's a legitimate opportunity for all of them," Zimmer said, including Christian Ponder in that plan.

Cassel has taken most of the turns with the first



Vikings quarterback Matt Cassel (16), shown dropping back to pass last December against Chicago, is one of three quarterbacks competing for Minnesota's starting spot in 2014.

team offense this spring, but Bridgewater has been in there a lot, too.

"The thing I want to guard against most is rushing into a decision," Zimmer said,

adding: "That's really in regards to all of the positions, not just the quarterback position."

Declaring every spot on the team unsettled is one of the purest forms of coach speak, with the motivation of maximum effort always behind such proclamations.

When a mid-June minicamp is the setting, though, Zimmer or any other of his peers would be foolish to truly pick a starter prior to the grind of two-a-day practices and preseason games that offer a greater window into ability, fortitude and growth.

"We've got time," Zimmer said.

The Vikings report to training camp July 24.

"That's all you ever ask for, just a chance to compete," Bridgewater said Wednesday. "This coaching staff has done a great job of just allowing all the quarterbacks to just compete over these past six weeks."

The time from the draft to the end of organized off-

season practices has been a whirlwind for many a rookie, but Bridgewater hasn't budged in expression of understated confidence in his grasp of the complex, deep playbook being thrown at him.

There have been a lot of NFL quarterbacks who didn't translate a command of the offense into success on Sundays when the crowd is loud and the blitz is constantly coming at them, but this is an important first step for Bridgewater.

"It's amazing that I've been able to learn so much in the six weeks that I've been here. I've just been gaining that confidence every day. Just feeling really comfortable right now and knowing that I still have room for improvement and a long way to go to be where I want to be," Bridgewater said, adding: "It hasn't been overwhelming at all."

Footwork has been a primary focus this spring. Re-calibrating his anticipation

and timing in terms of identifying and targeting open receivers from college to NFL speed has been the biggest challenge, but Bridgewater said he's taught himself how to breathe in a way that slows the action in front of him to a workable pace.

He has tried to take advantage of all opportunities to enhance his development, even using football video games to use as "virtual reps" to further envision the art of dropping into the pocket, scanning the field and releasing the ball.

"He does a great job of picking up the system," Cassel said.

Whether he's bound to be a backup or the starter come September, that's a decision for another day.

"We have enough going on," Cassel said, dismissing the notion of worrying about the depth chart at this point in the year. "That's where our concentration lies, and if it's on anything else then it's foolish."

Vikings hope speedy rookie also a quick study

EDEN PRAIRIE (AP) — Jerick McKinnon was the last of Minnesota's 10 draft picks to sign his rookie contract.

That's about the only race he wouldn't win.

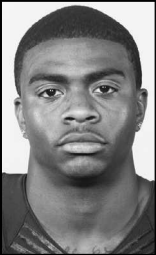
The Vikings selected McKinnon in the third round out of Georgia Southern, using a pick acquired from Seattle in the Percy Harvin trade the previous year. They targeted him for his versatility, his vision and, most of all, his speed.

"Too good of an athlete to pass up," general manager Rick Spielman said. "Just too explosive of a player."

McKinnon played a variety of positions for the Eagles, a perennial FCS power, frequently as an option-style

quarterback. He also played cornerback and lined up as a slot receiver. The Vikings have slotted McKinnon as a running back, hoping the 5-foot-9, 210-pound prospect can be a productive alternative to Adrian Peterson.

"Honestly, I think I can do everything," McKinnon said. "But I guess the coaches have a vision of what they want from me, and whatever that role is I'm ready to embrace it and do the best that I can for the team."



Jerick McKinnon

When Toby Gerhart, the dependable backup the last four seasons, left as a free agent, the Vikings needed to find another ball carrier.

Peterson, 29, is approaching the point of a running back's career when production usually dips and injuries increase. Plus, just about every NFL offense worth its playbook has a change-of-pace runner who can slither through the line or catch passes on the perimeter.

Putting the ball in the hands of multiple skills players has been a hallmark of offensive coordinator Norv Turner, who turned Darren Sproles into a rushing-receiving threat when he coached

San Diego.

As the Vikings started minicamp Tuesday, their final series of organized practices before a five-week break before training camp, McKinnon was coming along nicely.

"What jumps out to me about him is he's a quick learner," running backs coach Kirby Wilson said. "He retains the information and then he's able to come out and execute it out on the field. So that's impressive for a young guy."

Wilson's scouting of McKinnon supported the fondness developed by Spielman, coach Mike Zimmer and Turner. McKinnon had 17 games of 100 yards rushing or more at Georgia South-

ern, finishing his career with 3,899 yards rushing and 42 touchdowns, and Wilson saw every single one of those on video.

"He stood out to me as a guy who's very quick, had a nice burst into the line of scrimmage, had a very good acceleration in and out of his cuts," Wilson said. "I thought he had a very good vision and instincts and change of direction, all of the things that indicate he could possibly be a good football player at this level."

McKinnon was dubbed "Jet" by a couple of his Eagles teammates, for an obvious reason. His official 4.41-second 40-yard dash time at the NFL scouting

combine was the second-fastest among running backs.

"I think it's a pretty cool name. Something that's grown on me, from college," McKinnon said.

Running the option in college has given him toughness between the tackles. Watching Peterson perform so far as a pro has provided him even more valuable experience.

"For a minute, it was unreal just to see him in practice and stuff like that," McKinnon said. "But the more I get to talk to him and the more I feel him out and the more I get some tips he really acts like a mentor toward me. So I just take what I can."

Kevin Williams starting new chapter with Seattle

RENTON, Wash. (AP) — There was still a chance for Kevin Williams to return to Minnesota, the only place he knew in his NFL career. There was also a chance to join New England and play for the Patriots.

So why is Williams now wearing a Seattle Seahawks uniform when he potentially could have gotten more money elsewhere?

"I think at the end of the day they are doing some great things with a bunch of young guys," Williams said. "A chance to play in a great rotation at the defensive line. I think it's the best fit for me."

Williams was the latest addition to the Seahawks

roster just before the start of this week's minicamp. After seeing the defensive line thinned by free agency and salary cap cuts following their Super Bowl title, the addition of Williams this late could be a major coup for the Seahawks.

"We always have cherished big guys and there was a spot, we thought, for Kevin. We've talked to him for a really long time; we've talked to him throughout the offseason



Kevin Williams

with the thought of maybe getting this worked out," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said. "We have tremendous respect for the person that he is, the competitor that he is, the leader that he is. He's a big man that plays tough. We want him to play good, physical football for us like he always has."

Though his career, now entering its 12th season, Williams has only known playing for the Vikings. He lived up to the billing of being the No. 9 overall pick in the 2003 draft, becoming a five-time AP first-team All-Pro selection as one of the more dominant interior linemen in the game.

Williams believes he can

still contribute. And Seattle is getting him at a bargain of \$1.5 million for 2014.

"I try to do it all pretty good. If it's rush the passer, stopping the run or whatever the case I think I can help out in each way," Williams said.

Seattle was most attractive to Williams because at age 33 — he'll turn 34 before the start of the season — he would not have to carry the load anymore. According to Football Outsiders, Williams played 718 defensive snaps last season for the Vikings. Meanwhile, no Seattle player on the defensive line — playoffs included — played more than 600 snaps last season.

Williams said that rotation was something he noticed as an opponent last season when the Seahawks played the Vikings.

"Man, those guys have a nice rotation on defense. They were having fun and you could see it. I think everyone that has watched them play lately can see how much fun they're having offensively and defensively," Williams said. "At the end of the day having fun and doing things right ended up in a lot of wins and those guys getting a Super Bowl last year."

If Williams can match his production from recent seasons, it could lead to more flexibility on Seattle's defen-

sive line. One of the unique traits of the Seahawks front four the past few seasons was using big bodied Red Bryant as a defensive end in running situations. Bryant was released following the Super Bowl, leaving Seattle without that bigger option to try and hold the edge against the run.

The addition of Williams could solve that issue. Defensive tackle Tony McDaniel has a similar build and skills as Bryant. If Williams can be effective on the interior, Seattle could shift McDaniel to the outside if the need is there.


"Everybody loves what he's about," Carroll said. "We had him in earlier in the process, learned about him, studied him, talked to a million people about him and he's just come out as a great guy to add that brings the big body dimension to us that we can utilize."




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